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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of a course that would improve instruction for preservice teachers and for elementary school students through "real world" integration of reading and the related processes of listening, speaking, and writing. "Integrated Language Arts Instruction in the Elementary School" is presented as a model for field-based methods courses seeking a balance between traditional approaches and a whole language philosophy. The preservice teachers were placed in the elementary school classroom in groups, allowing them to collaborate and share observations, insights, concerns, and teaching responsibilities; university faculty met with the preservice teachers and the K-6 faculty at the elementary school. University classes covered the knowledge base relative to language and literacy acquisition, making connections between the field experiences and the knowledge base. At the end of the course, preservice teachers demonstrated greater understanding in their planning and teaching by observation, by their performance on several evaluation instruments, and in their student teaching the following semester. In the first year, the elementary school experienced significantly improved scores on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program instrument compared to prior years. The success of the program encouraged other collaborative efforts between methods courses and elementary schools and prompted program revisions to make methods courses more interdisciplinary. (Contains 18 references.) (ND)

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Integrating Content Instruction in the College Classroom: Integrated Language Arts Instruction in the Elementary School

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51st Annual Conference and Exhibit Show "Dancing to the Rhythm of Life: An Invitation to Becoming."
March 16-19, 1996

Background

In Spring, 1994, we proposed an experimental methods course, Integrated Language Arts Instruction in the Elementary School, to our faculty, department chair and school dean. The proposed course was duly approved and scheduled for the Fall 1994 semester.

The purpose of the course is to demonstrate to pre-service teachers, prior to student teaching, the "real-world" integration of reading and the related communication arts processes of listening, speaking and writing. New views of language and literacy acquisition are prompting many schools to move toward an integration of the language arts, and so too must we, if we are to prepare our students for the classrooms they will inhabit. Reading Methods and Communication Arts Methods had been offered as two separate 3 credit courses. Our course

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eliminated that fragmentation and presented a unified perspective in one block of 3 hours twice each week (6 credit hours) taught by both of us.

Our expectation was that this experimental integrated language arts course would improve the existing Professional Teacher Education Program in several ways. The course goes beyond combining or condensing subject matter. It demonstrates the necessity for a unified conceptual framework in order to yield desired results in language and literacy acquisition. By using reflection, peer collaboration, demonstration lessons, and field experiences, we provide students with the opportunity to deal with the complexities of language and literacy acquisition in authentic ways. Expanded definitions of literacy (the ability to communicate effectively, not just the ability to read) consistent with the standards developed by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, and the English Language Arts -Maryland Curriculum Framework are included. Current views of appropriate individualized instruction for at-risk children are incorporated. Through team teaching (not take turn teaching), we demonstrate peer collaboration and interdisciplinary teaching, an actual model for pre-service teachers to replicate in their future classrooms. Team teaching allows students to see stylistic differences in the context of philosophical similarities. All of the above mentioned factors serve to keep us and our students on the cutting edge of restructuring initiatives for improved competencies.

For over 20 years, Reading Methods and Communication Arts Methods have been two separate courses. The Integrated Language Arts course, and the collaborative effort to produce it, would be a model for field-based methods courses. Additionally, this course could potentially free up needed credit hours to accommodate planned changes for program improvement. Ultimately, components of the Diagnosis and Correction of Reading Difficulties course could be

incorporated into this course as well as dimensions of cross-curricular content areas such as math, science, and social studies.

Structure and Design

"Take strength from your own purpose, for you will know what you must do, if you let yourself...and trust friendships. Friends you will have need of, for in you two worlds meet. There is no one on both sides with you, so you must learn to take your own counsel; and not to fear what is strange, if you know it also to be true.

It is not an enviable position being a bridge, especially a bridge with visions..."

The Blue Sword
Robin McKinley

Designing the actual course was easy. While our styles are different, we both hold similar philosophies about language and literacy acquisition and about teaching and learning. We believe in the interrelatedness of all of the language modes. We believe in holistic approaches to language and literacy development. We believe in authentic assessments. We believe in the value of inquiry and reflection in learning. We believe in an apprenticeship model of authentic instruction. We knew we could not provide authentic experiences for and assessments of our pre-service teachers without the help of in-service teachers in "real" classrooms with real children. Therefore, the course had to be field-based.

Teaching the course in a field-based context forced us to seek a balance between traditional approaches and a whole language philosophy due to the realities of existing Reading and Language Arts instruction in the local district. During

Spring 1994, we worked with a willing local elementary school and formed a Reading Advisory Committee. The principal at this school was very knowledgeable in the field of Reading and wanted to transition from a traditional basal approach to a more holistic approach using a literature-based program. The advisory committee consisted of me and my colleague, John T. Wolinski, the principal, the Reading Specialist, and 6 teachers, one from each grade level. We spent the next few months developing a set of guiding principles, a set of beliefs we could all share and work from, for Language Arts instruction. The schedule was changed to accommodate a 90-minute Language Arts block in the morning and a 30-minute Reading period in the afternoon.

Schedules needed to be arranged at the university so that our pre-service teachers could be at the school during the morning Language Arts block or the afternoon Reading period . We created a mechanism in the form of a non-credit course to hold open a designated morning or afternoon in our students' schedules. We then placed them in the elementary school classrooms in triads. This arrangement of three pre-service teachers in one elementary school classroom allowed our students to collaborate, sharing observations, insights, concerns, and teaching responsibilities. This proved to be a very effective model.

Our schedules were designed to allow us opportunities for field visits when our students were in the elementary school and to permit us to meet with the K-6 faculty after school or during their planning periods.

In our twice weekly, 3-hour session at the university, we studied the knowledge base relative to the language and literacy acquisition and attempted to make connections between the field experiences ("real" world) and the knowledge base ("ideal" world). This was done through the use of discussions, reflection journals, video tapes, case studies, in-class planning sessions, demonstration lessons

and modeling, thematic units, field projects, and individualized self-improvement plans.

Results

"When collaboration is undertaken in a systematic fashion, the only prediction that can be made is that all the participants will change. The amount and kind of change is uncertain."

Westberg, Clyde, and Condon (1996)

Our primary desired outcome was improved instruction for our methods students (pre-service teachers). We hoped to reduce the "wash-out" effect of university methods courses by embedding instruction in the "real" world, thereby demonstrating that "ivory tower" ideas can and do work, and that the persistent prevalence of traditions, such as Round Robin Reading and three Reading groups, does not necessarily attest to the effectiveness of a given approach. We also hoped K-6 faculty would discover new ways of promoting the learning in their students and become more effective at what they do. Our ultimate goal was improved instruction for elementary school students, but this was more a vision, a long-term goal, that, realistically, would be realized over the course of a number of years. Surprisingly, both goals were met.

Greater understandings on the part of our pre-service teachers were evidenced in observations of their planning and teaching, their performance on a variety of instruments we used to evaluate their understandings, and by their performance in student teaching the following semester.

In the first year, the elementary school experienced significantly improved Reading scores on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program

instrument compared to prior years. The school also received the Exemplary Reading Program Award from the State of Maryland International Reading Association Council.

Other outcomes, both anticipated and unexpected, were very positive. One such hoped for outcome was that our collaborative effort inspired other collaborative efforts between and among our department's faculty in other methods courses and other elementary schools.

Our initiative provided a catalyst for program change in the form program revision to make methods courses more interdisciplinary, emphasizing effective practices common to all content areas. Currently, we are exploring different and multiple ways of incorporating field experiences into our Professional Teacher Preparation Program at various points in time. The apprenticeship model only works well if the apprentice is paired with a master craftsman. Identifying the masters and structuring mutually beneficial collaborative initiatives with them is now underway.

Positive perceptions of the value of methods course rose considerably. K-6 faculty actually attended some of our university class sessions and asked for copies of our textbook. The Reading Advisory Council continued to work as a group to set new goals and engage in problem solving. Methods students who took the Integrated Language Arts course praised it highly both on the course evaluation at the end of the semester and subsequently by word of mouth. In Fall 1996, twice as many students registered for the course as there were slots available.

Some wonderful unanticipated outcomes for which we cannot claim sole credit also occurred. There were a variety of collaborative initiatives by university students to implement mentoring programs, after-school tutoring programs, math clubs, science clubs, and arts clubs. An award, in the form of an engraved plaque, was presented to Salisbury State University's President and the Dean of the

Department of Education by the elementary school principal, faculty and students acknowledging the wonderful collaborative efforts.

The professional growth both John and I experienced was greater than we had anticipated. We have affected one another's teaching in ways we are still discovering. This fall, another colleague who teaches Math Methods in the Elementary Classroom will join us. Our plan is to integrate projects and arrange the sequence of instruction so that math instruction incorporates the language arts in significant and meaningful ways.

The journey is exciting, and so we continue to travel. We encourage all to venture forth into the "real world," but warn that having done so, you many never return from the journey.

"Others came, having tasted its wine, and felt themselves somehow transformed, if only a little bit - just enough to make them restless...And some of these looked long and settled; and it, whatever it was, crept into the eyes of those who stayed, and into their blood, so they could not bear the thought of leaving...

from "The Stolen Princess" in
The Door in the Hedge by
Robin McKinley

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